DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 890 CG 015 167

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TITLE The Impact of Confidants on Adjusting to Stressful Events in Adulthood.
SPONS AGENCY Administration on Aging (DHEW), Washington, D.C.: National Inst. on Aging (DHEW/PHS), Bethesda, Md.: Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Graduate School.
PUB DATE Nov 80
GRANT 90-A-644; 110249; NIA-5-P01-AG-00123
NOTE 28p.: Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (33rd, San Diego, CA, November 21-25, 1980). Reference list is of marginal legibility.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); Adults; *Age Differences; Comparative Analysis; *Coping; Followup Studies; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Mental Health; Older Adults; *Psychological Needs; Social Life; Spouses; Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS *Intimacy

ABSTRACT

A confiding spousal relationship and/or a confidant outside the marital relationship may affect an individual's ability to cope with various stressful events occurring during the adult years. Initial interviews of adults (N=2299) were conducted in 1972; a follow-up study was conducted in 1976 with 1106 adults. The findings confirmed the conclusions of previous studies, i.e., that the absence of intimate ties was a disadvantage in coping with stressful life events. There was a lower frequency of confiding relationships among the elderly, although the oldest individuals with intimate relationships reported less distress and higher self-esteem than the oldest individuals without intimate relationships. Confiding in a spouse appeared to be slightly more effective for handling stress than confiding in friends or relatives. (RC)

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THE IMPACT OF CONFIDANTS ON ADJUSTING TO STRESSFUL EVENTS IN ADULTHOOD[1]

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1. Presented at the 33rd Annual Scientific Meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, CA., November, 1980. This study was supported by a grant from the Graduate School Research Committee, University of Wisconsin-Madison, #110249. The initial data were collected by Dr. Leonard Pearlin, Intramural Research Program, NIMH. The follow-up data were collected under grants to Morton Lieberman, University of Chicago, from the Administration on Aging, #90-A-644, and from the National Institute on Aging, NIA 5-P01-AG 00123.

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THE IMPACT OF CONFIDANTS ON ADJUSTING TO STRESSFUL EVENTS IN ADULTHOOD

Over the last two decades researchers and practitioners have become acutely aware of the important resources that social support systems supply to people attempting to cope with stressful life events (Cobb, 1976; Gourash, 1979; Henderson, 1977). In most cases, however, studies have focused unduly on superficial characteristics of social relationships, ignoring what many researchers believe to be more critical determinants of the adaptive value of social support. Lowenthal, for example, has repeatedly expressed dismay that, despite the importance several theorists attach to the need for intimacy, few investigators have measured the quality, depth or reciprocity of social relationships in their attempts to assess the stress-buffering role of social support (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Lowenthal and Robinson, 1976; Lowenthal and Weiss, 1976). More recently, Weiss (in press) concluded that, "While the link between interpersonal intimacy and one's state of well-being or adaptation may seem evident, there is very little documentation of . . . [intimacy's] role as a resource for adaptation in the face of stress." To evaluate this link empirically, the present study assessed how having a confiding spousal relationship and/or a confidant outside the marital bond affected people's ability to cope with various stressful events occurring during the adult years.

Although analyses of confiding relationships have been infrequent, appearing often as peripheral components of a study, there is mounting

evidence of the adaptive value of intimate relationships in the face of numerous stressful situations, including severe illness (Brown, Bhrolchain and Harris, 1975), job-related stress (Burke and Weir, 1977) and widowhood (Bankoff, 1981; Glick, et al., 1974; Lopata, 1973; Silverman, 1970). Nevertheless, longitudinal findings reported by Lowenthal and Weiss (1976) suggest that the positive effect that intimate relations have on adaptation dissipates over time and is subject to age and gender variations.

Indeed, both the likelihood of having a confidant and the prospects for benefiting from intimate attachments seem to vary by age, gender, marital and socio-economic status, although studies have disagreed about the direction of these effects. In most investigations, women were more likely than men to have a confidant and to reach beyond their spouse for intimacy and affection (Arth, 1962; Booth, 1972; Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Powers and Bultena, 1976; Tigges, Cowgill and Habenstein, 1980). Researchers also have concluded that marriage depresses confiding behavior with friends and relatives (Booth and Hess, 1974; Powers and Bultena, 1976) and that intimate relationships--with both spouse and other associates--diminish with age (Arth, 1962; Weiss, in press). Curiously, however, the most frequently cited study (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968) reported no age-related decline and found the proportion of individuals having confidants to be higher among married than widowed or single respondents--findings contradictory to other studies probably because Lowenthal and Haven investigated an older sample (over age 60). Reports of the effects of socio-economic status are inconsistent: Powers and Bultena (1976) found that males, but not females, were more

likely to have a close friend if they had a relatively low income; but in Lowenthal and Haven's (1968) sample, confidants were more common among respondents of higher socio-economic status, regardless of gender.

As to the benefits bestowed by confidants, Weiss (in press) reported that intimate relationships buffered the stressful aspects of life events for older (over age 50) but not younger adults. Curiously, he found that although the level of intimacy with one's spouse generally was lower in older age groups, its effect as a buffer to stress was higher. In fact, young women who scored high on Weiss' intimacy scales suffered significantly more stress from life events than those with low scores. Among middle-aged individuals, Palmore and Luikart (1972) found a significant positive correlation between having a confidant and life satisfaction for males only, whereas in Lowenthal and Haven's (1968) study of older people, the morale of both men and women was enhanced by having a confidant.

Some researchers have questioned whether certain types of confiding relationships are more adaptive than others. Weiss (in press), for example, reasoned that since the level of intimacy with friends tends to remain constant across adulthood while spousal intimacy generally declines, intimate friendships should be a more significant resource than the spousal relationship in adapting to stress; his data, however, revealed just the opposite pattern. Similarly, Dunckley and Lutes (1979) found that whenever the type of confidant had a significant effect on the life satisfaction of their elderly respondents, higher satisfaction was associated with having a family member rather than a friend or helping professional as a confidant. This seems to contradict a number of studies reporting that morale among the elderly is influenced more by relationships with friends than relatives (see Brown, 1981).

Another unsettled issue involves the comparative effectiveness in coping with stressful events of relying upon one or two confidants instead of a larger network of less intimate relationships. In their effort to replicate Brown, et al.'s (1975) study showing the value of an intimate associate in averting distress following a severe illness, Miller and Ingham (1976) found not only that the effect was stronger for women than men but also that several acquaintances seemed to provide just as effective a buffer to distress as a confidant did. This contradicts Henderson, et al.'s (1978) finding that neurotic symptoms were heightened more by the absence of intimate attachments than by a lack of superficial relationships. Yet, Granovetter (1973) argued that in many cases a "loose-knit" social network with linkages to individuals beyond one's own acquaintances provided more useful resources than a more intimate network of associates. Studies of individuals attempting to secure an illegal abortion (Lee, 1968) or land a job (Granovetter, 1974) supported this thesis. Indeed, Maas and Kuypers' (1974) finding that personality and lifestyle influence whether an individual develops intimate or detached relationships suggests that the adaptiveness of confidant relations may depend on whether or not they are compatible with the individual's interpersonal disposition. This could explain, for example, why Lowenthal (1964) found that the older persons most vulnerable to psychiatric hospitalization or low morale were not life-long isolates but individuals who had tried and failed to establish intimate relationships.

In sum, the patterns and contradictions that have emerged from investigations of intimate relationships underscore the need for a more systematic and comprehensive analysis of how confidants affect people's

efforts to cope with stressful life events. The aim of the present study was to provide such an analysis by addressing four major questions. First, are the positive effects of confidants applicable only to the few specific types of stressful events that have been examined or do they apply across the range of events that are likely to occur during adulthood? Second, are these effects mediated by social factors, including age, sex, race, marital and socio-economic status? Third, does the type of associate--spouse, relative, friend, etc.--with whom one builds an intimate relationship make a difference? Finally, is it possible to weigh the comparative advantage of having a confidant versus relying upon a more loose-knit support network?

METHOD

Sample

The present study was part of a longitudinal investigation concerned with how people adjust to major life events and stressful situations occurring across adulthood. The initial "base line" interviews were conducted in 1972 with 2299 individuals who, collectively, formed a representative sample of adults age 18 to 65 living in the Chicago Urbanized Area. The sample was generated by a household cluster method among randomly selected blocks and census tracts.

The sex of the intended respondent was prelisted to ensure an equal representation of males and females. Other details of the sampling procedure are available elsewhere (Pearlin, 1975). In 1976, every member of the original sample who could be relocated and persuaded to participate in a "follow-up" study was reinterviewed. Except for their lower socio-economic status and higher average age, the 17 percent (n=231) who were located but refused to participate again did not differ significantly from the 1106 respondents who were reinterviewed. However, compared to all 1193 base line respondents who were not reinterviewed, the 1106 who did participate in the follow-up study were disproportionately white, married, and relatively high in socio-economic status, and were biased toward the more stable, satisfied and moderately stressed portions of the original sample.

Social Network Measures

The follow-up interview contained a number of questions designed to evaluate the respondent's informal social support network. The central question for the present study was, "Among your friends and relatives, excluding your spouse, is there someone you feel you can tell just about anything to, someone you can count on for understanding and advice?"--to which respondents could answer "none", "one person" or "more than one." Those who acknowledged one or more confidants also indicated the basis of the relationship(s) (friend, sibling, etc.). Married respondents were considered to have a confiding spousal relationship if they strongly agreed with the statement, "My spouse is someone

I can really talk with about things that are important to me." Respondents also reported how frequently (very often, fairly often, once in a while, never, or none available) they talked about important personal problems with each of seven categories of informal associates: parents, in-laws, adult children (over age 17), spouse, other relatives, friends, neighbors. Then they indicated whether they could usually, sometimes or never count on each of these types of associates for help in an emergency. The mean response across all available categories formed the network intimacy and dependability scores, respectively.

To measure the more common, quantitative dimensions of social support, respondents were asked whether any relatives (and if so, what types) and/or close friends lived within an hour's drive and, if so, how often in a typical month they got together with these people. They also reported how frequently they spoke in person or by phone with the categories of informal associates listed in the preceding paragraph, excepting spouse. The number of categories available formed the network diversity score, and the mean response on all available categories formed the network activity score. To measure the cohesiveness of the proximal network, respondents were asked how many things people in the neighborhood had in common, how many people moved in and out of the area, how often neighbors socialized together, and how many were active in organizations outside the local area.

Two questions from the base line study measured general attitudes about self-disclosure and seeking help. Respondents indicated whether they agreed or disagreed that, "It is difficult for me to talk about myself with other people" and "I usually try to talk out my problems with other people."

In sum, the data incorporated eight dimensions of social support: the proximity of primary relationships (close friends and relatives), the network's diversity (number of different types of informal associates) and activity (frequency of contact), cohesiveness of the neighborhood, the strength of predispositions to confide and seek help, the network's intimacy (general degree of confiding) and perceived dependability (for emergency help), and the presence or absence of confiding relationships (with spouse and beyond spouse).

Events and Help-Seeking

In the follow-up interview, respondents were asked which of 16 major life events they had encountered in the four years since the base line interview. They indicated how troublesome each event encountered had been and, if "somewhat" or "very" troublesome, whether or not they had approached anyone for advice or assistance. Those who reported seeking help were asked whom they had contacted. The other troubled respondents were asked to indicate which of six reasons explained their decision not to consult others (more than one could be checked): they felt able to handle it alone, they felt no one would be capable of or interested in helping, they knew no one to talk to, they thought it was too personal, or they decided that seeking help took too much effort. In a similar fashion respondents described the day-to-day frustrations and aggravations enountered in four adult roles (work, money management, marriage and parenthood) and, for those with numerous frustrations, how troublesome they had been. Those who reported being "somewhat" or "very" troubled were asked whether or not they sought help. Again, for each troublesome role, the helpers contacted or reasons for not seeking assistance were

recorded. By combining the responses to all events and role-related frustrations it was possible to classify each respondent as a help-seeker (someone who consulted others for at least one troublesome event or set of role frustrations), a non-seeker (someone who handled all troublesome changes without appealing for help), an untroubled changer (someone who experienced one or more changes but was never troubled by them) or a non-changer (someone who had encountered neither events nor substantial role frustrations since the base line interview).

Measures of Well-Being

To assess the impact of life events on psychological well-being, the follow-up interview repeated three measures from the base-line study: Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale, the anxiety and depression sub-scales of the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (Derogatis, et al., 1974), and a psychological distress scale designed specifically for this study. The distress scale is the most meaningful indicator in the present study because it measured most directly the degree of emotional upset triggered by the events and frustrations enumerated by a respondent (for details of the scale's construction, see Pearlin, 1975). Scores for each measure represented the mean response across items.

FINDINGS

Across the sample as a whole, 85 percent of the respondents acknowledged having a confidant (not including their spouse), and slightly over one-half claimed to have more than one such relationship (see table 1). With age, however, the likelihood of having a confidant diminished significantly: the proportion of older adults (over age 55) lacking an intimate companion was twice as high as among young adults (under age 35); the age difference was more pronounced for men (χ^2 (4) = 11.06, $p < .05$) than for women (χ^2 (4) = 4.46, n.s.). Married and separated individuals were nearly twice as likely to be without a confidant as divorced, widowed or single respondents. About twice as many males as females failed to report a confidant. Although equal proportions of blacks and whites lacked a confidant, blacks were significantly less likely to have more than one such companion. Socio-economic status, as measured by educational level, did not clearly differentiate people with versus without an intimate associate. In general, then, social background differences in the likelihood of having a confidant concurred with findings from previous studies.

Friends were the most common type of associate selected for an intimate relationship. They were mentioned by nearly three-fourths of the respondents who had a confidant. Over one-fourth claimed a sibling as a confidant, 18 percent chose a parent, 10 percent named a child, and 16 percent selected a more distant relative. As would be expected, the proportion nominating a parent diminished significnatly with age, χ^2 (2) = 60.82, $p < .001$, while the percentage naming a child increased, χ^2 (2) = 93.35, $p < .001$. Otherwise, social background (age, gender and race) had no significant effect on the type of associate chosen for a confiding relationship.

Table 1

Differences in Social Background Among Respondents with Two or More, One, or No Confidant(s)

	Two or More		One Confidant		No Confidant		X^2	df	Signif.
	%	N	%	N	%	N			
Total	53	(574)	32	(349)	15	(156)	---	--	--
Age Group							11.40	4	.05
20 - 35	58	(175)	32	(98)	10	(31)			
36 - 55	54	(264)	31	(152)	15	(71)			
56 - 75	47	(135)	34	(99)	19	(54)			
Gender							26.24	2	.000
Male	52	(223)	27	(118)	21	(90)			
Female	54	(351)	36	(231)	10	(66)			
Race							11.47	2	.01
White	55	(481)	31	(269)	14	(127)			
Black	42	(68)	44	(71)	15	(24)			
Marital Status							18.76	8	.05
Married	51	(404)	32	(254)	17	(130)			
Separated	38	(11)	48	(14)	14	(4)			
Divorced	63	(51)	27	(22)	10	(8)			
Widowed	55	(54)	37	(36)	8	(8)			
Single	65	(54)	28	(23)	7	(6)			
Education (yrs)							48.63	6	.000
Under 12	37	(97)	45	(120)	18	(47)			
12	58	(195)	30	(101)	12	(40)			
13 - 15	56	(135)	26	(64)	18	(44)			
16 or More	64	(138)	26	(57)	10	(21)			

Characteristics of Social Support

The pervasiveness of confidants raised the possibility that people without such a relationship simply lacked a social network sufficiently large or cohesive or close at hand to generate intimate ties. The data, however, provide only marginal support for this hypothesis (see table 2). Controlling for age, gender and race, the networks of respondents who had confidants were no more diverse than among those who lacked an intimate companion. An overwhelming and equivalent proportion of each group (about 85 percent) reported relatives living nearby, although respondents with confidants had a greater variety of relatives close at hand. Since most confidants mentioned were friends, it is not surprising that people with friends living nearby were more likely to have an intimate companion. Indeed, virtually everyone reporting more than one confiding relationship had close friends living within an hour's drive, compared to only three-quarters of respondents without a confidant. The influence of neighborhood cohesiveness was similarly equivocal. On the one hand, respondents without intimate ties felt their neighbors had comparatively fewer things in common; on the other, they reported fewer neighbors being active in groups outside the area and described rates of neighborhood sociability and mobility that were equivalent to reports of respondents who had confidants.

In contrast to diversity, proximity and cohesiveness, the influence of activity (frequency of contact with network members) on the likelihood of having a confidant was clear and consistent. Among respondents reporting friends living nearby, less than a third with no intimate ties saw friends once a week or more, compared to nearly one-half of those with

Table 2

Differences on Measures of Social Networks and Help-Seeking Attitudes Among Respondents with Two or More, One, or No Confidant(s)

	Two or More	One	None	X^2/ F	df	p
Mean Diversity Score[1]	4.82	4.87	4.89	0.54	2,996	n.s.
% with relative(s) living nearby	89.8	86.1	84.5	4.64	2	.10
Mean # different types of relatives nearby	2.86	2.44	2.47	6.26	2,1076	.01
% with good friend(s) living nearby	96.5	88.8	75.6	68.05	2	.000
% describing neighbors as:[3]						
Having few things in common	31.4	41.0	50.0	28.39	4	.000
Rarely active in non-local groups	31.4	44.5	52.4	25.78	4	.000
Rarely socializing together	54.3	57.7	64.7	11.92	4	.05
Rarely moving in & out	44.7	43.4	44.7	1.03	4	n.s.
% seeing nearby relatives twice per month or less[2,4]	36.3	48.7	51.6	18.37	6	.01
% seeing nearby friends twice per month or less[2,4]	30.3	42.7	53.0	30.50	6	.000
Mean Activity Score[1]	2.76	2.59	2.40	35.78	2,996	.000
% finding it hard to talk about self	41.3	51.3	59.0	24.70	6	.000
% who usually talk out problems	70.4	64.5	54.5	18.85	6	.01
Mean Intimacy Score[1]	2.17	1.96	1.70	13.57	2,996	.000
Mean Dependability Score[1]	2.73	2.64	2.52	19.20	2,996	.000

[1]Controlling for effects of age, gender and race.
[2]Excludes R's with no relatives/good friends living nearby.
[3]Response categories for X^2 analyses were: many/often, some, few/rare.
[4]Response categories for X^2 analyses were: never, once or twice/month, 3 to 4 times, more often.

more than one confidant. Interactions with nearby relatives reflected a similar pattern, as did the measure of general network activity across all types of informal associates. All of these differences were independent of age, gender and race.

Favorable attitudes toward self-disclosure and seeking help also seemed to enhance the chances of having a confidant. Three-fifths of the respondents without intimate ties confessed to having trouble talking about themselves with others, compared to one-half of those with one and only two-fifths of those with more than one confidant. Only one-half of those without a confidant felt they usually tried to talk over problems with others, compared to two-thirds of those with one or more intimate relationships. These differences diminished with age and failed to appear among blacks. Yet, controlling for the effects of age, race and gender, the network intimacy and dependability scale scores were both significantly higher among respondents who had confidants.

In sum, the likelihood of having a confidant did not seem to reflect simply the availability of social supports. The more discriminating factors involved how respondents perceived and related to their social networks. Those who reported an intimate relationship interacted with informal associates more frequently, sought the counsel of a variety of network members with greater regularity, felt more at ease revealing problems and personal information to others, and expressed greater confidence that informal associates would respond to requests for help.

Help-Seeking Behavior

Since individuals who lacked confidants also appeared to have comparatively less active, intimate and supportive social networks, it is not surprising that they found it more difficult to solicit and

receive assistance in coping with major life changes (see table 3). Although the groups reported an equivalent number of events and role-related frustrations, only one-half of those without confidants, compared to two-thirds of respondents with an intimate companion, elected to seek help. Social background, however, mediated this relationship: having a confidant failed to alter the likelihood of help-seeking among the elderly, among females and among blacks.

The reasons non-seekers gave for not consulting others also differentiated respondents with versus without confidants. While some respondents maintained that they deferred from help-seeking simply because they felt they could handle the problem without assistance, 80 percent of the non-seekers who lacked confidants, compared to 60 percent of non-seekers who had a confidant, expressed some reluctance to approaching others for assistance. This difference was not affected by age, gender or race.

Among respondents who did consult others, having an intimate relationship seemed to affect the type of helpers people approached. While most help-seekers looked to their informal network (friends, neighbors, co-workers, family members or other relatives) to provide assistance, one-fourth of those who lacked confidants were entirely dependent upon professionals, compared to only 10 percent of the help-seekers who had confidants. Again, however, the difference diminished with age and was characteristic of males but not females and whites but not blacks.

Impact on Well-Being

With comparatively weak social networks and strong dispositions against turning to others for support, respondents without confidants

Table 3

Differences[a] in Help-Seeking Behavior and Well-Being Among Respondents with Two or More, One, or No Confidant(s)

	Two or More % (N)	One % (N)	No Confidant % (N)	X^2	df	p
Among R's reporting events, proportion:						
Never troubled	40 (216)	40 (132)	41 (60)	0.09	2	n.s.
At least once	60 (326)	60 (200)	59 (86)			
Among troubled R's, proportion seeking help:						
Never	32 (103)	33 (66)	46 (40)	6.91	2	.05
At least once	68 (223)	67 (134)	54 (46)			
Among non-seekers, proportion who were:						
Self-reliant	44 (45)	36 (24)	20 (8)	6.96	2	.05
Reluctant	56 (58)	64 (42)	80 (32)			
Among help-seekers, proportion contacting:						
Professionals only	10 (23)	10 (13)	26 (12)	10.89	4	.05
Inf. assocs. only	47 (105)	52 (70)	39 (18)			
Both	43 (95)	38 (51)	35 (16)			

	Mean Score	Mean Score	Mean Score	F	df	p
Distress scale[1]	1.63	1.70	1.75	4.57	2,1004	.05
Self-esteem scale[1]	3.62	3.54	3.52	5.66	2,1001	.01
Symptoms scale[1]	1.31	1.35	1.36	2.54	2, 994	.10

[1] Controlling for the effects of age, gender and race.

appeared to be more vulnerable to the potentially stressful impact of life events. Their scores on the measures of psychological well-being confirmed this vulnerability (see table 3). Controlling for the effects of age, gender and race and adjusting for differences in initial (base line) scores, respondents without confidants reported significantly greater psychological distress in the follow-up interview than those who had one or more intimate ties. Those without confidants also exhibited significantly lower self-esteem and slightly, but not significantly, higher levels of anxiety and depression. The only significant interaction effect revealed that the absence of a confidant had a greater impact on self-esteem among women than men.

Confiding in One's Spouse

Collectively, these findings provide a bleak portrait of social supports and adjustments to stressful events among the fifteen percent of respondents who had no confidants. But the image is mitigated by the fact that two-thirds of these individuals were able to confide in their spouse, leaving only four percent of the sample without any confiding relationship. Nevertheless, the measures of social support help-seeking behavior and well-being portrayed this four percent as a group with dramatically improverished resources and highly susceptible to stress (see table 4). Compared to groups of respondents who had confiding relationships with and/or beyond their spouse, and controlling for the effects of age, gender, race and marital status, those who had no intimate ties reported less diverse, less active and, as expected, less intimate social networks, as well as less confidence that informal associates could provide emergency assistance. They were more likely to be bothered by one or more events or sets of role-related frustrations,

Table 4

Differences in Social Support, Help-Seeking and Well-Being by Type of Confidant(s)

	Both Types	Only Fr/Rel	Only Spouse	Neither Type	X^2 / F	df	p
Mean Diversity Score[1]	5.18	4.24	5.09	4.46	117.14	3,974	.000
Mean Activity Score[1]	2.74	2.61	2.47	2.25	20.82	3,974	.000
Mean Intimacy Score[1]	2.13	2.00	1.80	1.49	35.94	3,974	.000
Mean Dependability Score[1]	2.74	2.61	2.59	2.35	21.55	3,974	.000
% reporting one or more troublesome changes	56.0	67.1	52.9	72.1	14.06	3	.01
% of troubled R's who ever sought help	67.4	68.8	57.4	48.4	7.04	3	.10
% of non-seekers who felt reluctant to seek assistance	54.5	64.6	73.9	87.5	8.45	3	.05
% of help-seekers who consulted professionals only	10.0	10.5	19.4	40.0	13.73	3	.01
Mean Distress Score[2]	1.55	1.85	1.58	2.09	18.46	3,886	.000
Mean Self-Esteem[2] Score	3.64	3.46	3.62	3.28	10.60	3,883	.000
Mean Symptoms Score[2]	1.28	1.41	1.28	1.56	10.26	3,878	.000

[1] Controlling for effects of age, gender and race.

[2] Controlling for effects of age, gender, race and marital status, and adjusting for base line score on distress/self-esteem/symptoms scale.

yet less likely to seek help or feel self-reliant in the face of troublesome changes. Those who did turn to others were much more dependent upon professionals than were help-seekers who could confide in their spouse and/or others. It is little wonder, then, that individuals with no intimate relationship posted higher levels of psychological distress and psycho-somatic symptoms as well as lower self-esteem (again, adjusting for base line differences in well-being and controlling for age, gender, race and marital status).

Differences between respondents who confided only in their spouse versus only in someone else were not as pronounced. Curiously, however, although individuals who selected a confiding relationship outside of marriage reported more active and intimate social networks, and seemed better able to turn to others--especially informal associates--for help or to express self-reliance in the face of troublesome changes, they had somewhat lower scores on measures of well-being than did those who confided only in their spouse.

DISCUSSION

The findings reconfirm the conclusions of previous studies that the absence of intimate ties leaves someone at a significant disadvantage in the face of potentially stressful life events. Respondents who had no confidants, particularly those who also were unable to confide in their spouse, reported comparatively undependable social support networks, a relatively low inclination to turn to others for advice,

assistance or emotional support, and, understandably, greater deficits in psychological well-being as a function of major life changes. In contrast to previous investigations, however, most of which focused on one type of event or one age group, the present study was able to document the benefits of confidants across a variety of stressful changes and across five decades of adulthood.

The lower frequency of confiding relationships among the elderly was not surprising. Others have reported that, compared to young and middle-aged adults, an older person has more difficulty replacing relationships lost by death or relocation (Riley, Foner and Associates, 1968), or even maintaining relationships in the face of mounting and tiresome demands often thrust upon associates by the older person's declining health and depreciated morale (Blau, 1973). Nor was it surprising that the proportion of older respondents without a confidant (excluding spouse) was higher among men (31 percent) than women (10 percent), given the greater tendency among males to shy away from intimate attachments and share confidences only with their wife (Arth, 1962; Booth, 1972; Lowenthal and Weiss, 1976; Powers and Bultena, 1976).

Considering the advantages bestowed by intimate ties, the disappearance of confiding relationships in old age was disconcerting. Of course, some would argue that the findings indicate that confidants are less effective resources in old age than in earlier years, since having a confidant did not affect help-seeking behavior as much among older as among young and middle-aged respondents. But this age effect seemed to reflect age differences in attitudes about seeking help more than the waning adaptiveness of confidants. Among respondents who lacked confidants, the proportion expressing reluctance to talk to others

about themselves or their problems remained constant across age groups. Among those who had confidants, however, the proportion grew steadily to the point that, in later adulthood, they no longer appeared significantly more comfortable confiding in others than did respondents with no intimate associates (excluding spouse). In contrast to these age changes in attitudes, age did not mediate the significant associations between confiding relationships and well-being: even in the oldest age group, individuals with intimate ties reported less distress and higher self-esteem. Apparently, then, the advantage that intimate relationships supply to someone confronted with stressful life changes lies not only in the physical and emotional resources they provide when asked to help, but in their sheer presence in the face of stress and in the confidence they inspire that assistance and empathy are available if needed. Given the loss of self-confidence and control over one's life that often accompany aging, the additional loss of confidants in old age becomes all the more disconcerting.

Having a confidant did not appear to be simply a means of compensating for the absence of an intimate spousal relationship since the likelihood of reporting a confidant was unrelated to the degree to which respondents felt they could talk over problems with their husband or wife. Indeed, these two types of intimate ties (spousal and extra-marital) seemed to encourage different approaches to stressful changes. Individuals who lacked extra-marital confidants but who could confide in their spouse were less inclined to seek help for stressful events and, when they did, more dependent upon professionals than were respondents whose intimate companions did not include their spouse. Yet, the social networks among these two groups were comparably active and

dependable, and both types of intimates helped to avert the deficits in well-being that troublesome changes precipitated among respondents with no confiding relationships at all. Although differences were not dramatic, confiding in one's spouse appeared to provide slightly better insurance against the stressful impact of major life changes than relying upon friends or relatives as confidants. Surprisingly, having intimate relationships both within and beyond the marital bond was no more adaptive than confiding exclusively in one's spouse. These findings reinforced the conclusions of other studies (Bunckley and Lutes, 1979; Weiss, in press) that, among several types of intimate companions, one's husband or wife is the most effective buffer against stress. In the present study, however, close friends and relatives were only marginally less effective alternatives.

While some researchers have been concerned with identifying the most adaptive type of intimate associate, others have speculated whether intimate relationships in general provide a better buffer to stress than a diverse network of superficial ties. The findings of the present study question the meaningfulness of this issue, since respondents who have confidants also were likely to have relatively active and diverse social networks. Indeed, since respondents with confidants tended to display "healthier" networks in a variety of respects, one cannot be certain whether the differences observed in this study reflected the advantages of having a confidant in particular or of having supportive social networks in general. In all fairness, however, perhaps the present data were not well suited to evaluating the comparative effectiveness of having one or two confidants versus a wealth of acquaintances, since the more socially isolated, unstable and highly stressed members

of the original sample were under-represented in the follow-up survey. In fact, the findings probably overestimate the proportion of urban adults who have confidants, as well as the proportion whose social networks provide an effective buffer to stressful life events.

I have presented the findings in a manner that suggests that the presence or absence of intimate attachments preceded and therefore affected people's efforts to cope with stressful changes in adulthood. Although this seems more logical than its inverse, the cross-sectional nature of the study encourages us to consider the possibility that confiding relationships were a consequence rather than an antecedent of people's responses to stressful life changes. Lowenthal and Weiss (1976) argued that negotiating a crisis can have a unifying effect on a person's intimate relationships. Presumably, crises can also turn acquaintances into friends. Which causal chain is more accurate? The effects are probably reciprocal, so that the support confidants supply in moments of distress serves not only to maintain well-being but also to strengthen the confiding relationship. The issue can be resolved only through longitidunal investigations.

In sum, the present study reaffirmed the adaptive significance of confiding relationships in efforts to minimize the stressful impact of major life changes in adulthood. Close friends, relatives, and particularly one's spouse seemed to supply useful resources in the face of troublesome events, even when not asked directly for advice, assistance or emotional support. It remains uncertain, however, whether the resources supplied by confiding relations are superior to the support individuals can obtain from a larger network of superficial ties, or whether confidants and acquaintances provide truly

distinctive and complementary resources. The answer to this question requires a closer examination of how individuals actually use the various components of their social support network in the face of stressful life events.

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